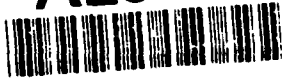


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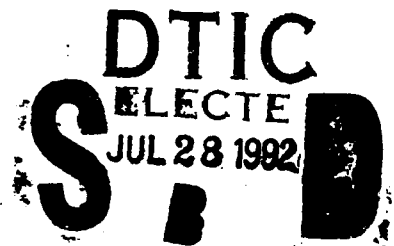
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The United States in Vietnam: Is It Time To Return?

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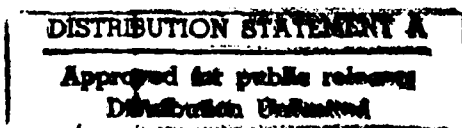
James F. Thomasson, Jr.

Lt Colonel Air National Guard



A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.



James F. Thomasson Jr.

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The paper concludes with a recommendation that the United States should begin use of Cam Ranh Bay on a limited basis because of the extreme importance of the Straits of Malacca. Also, the Southeast Asian country is located in a strategically central position from two areas of the world of vital importance to the United States - the Middle East and Northeast Asia. The importance of these areas makes a logistics base of operations a rational exception in an era of base closures. Finally, the growing economic importance of the area and the potential for a power vacuum argue for a base in the area.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Almost unfathomable changes have swept the world the last three years. The collapse of the Soviet Union marks the end of nearly fifty years of cold war. Such dramatic turning points in history are rare, and perhaps even more, rarely understood and appreciated as they occur. The United States is in such a position now.

The end of the cold war is reverberating through nearly every nation on the globe, often in directions that few could have anticipated a few years ago. Such change can offer dramatic opportunities and risks for national strategies. Such an opportunity may occur in Vietnam that, if seized imaginatively, could yield rich dividends for generations.

The volcanic destruction of Clark Air Base and the failed negotiations with the Philippine government to retain access to Subic Bay are forcing the Americans out of the Philippines. Many military leaders and defense analysts have accepted the reduction of the U. S. presence in the Far East as inevitable because of the reduction in the U. S. military budget and of minor importance because of the significant reduction of the threat from the former Soviet Union. However, the bases in the Philippines had a strategic value long before the Cold War and the military build up in World II. America has fought three wars in the last 50 years in the Far East and must insure that conditions leading to war do not develop again. If the U. S. fails to respond to the changes in the world appropriately as

they impact Southeast Asia, a power vacuum may develop and be quickly filled in a way inimical to U. S. vital interests.

Within the next year or two the United States and Vietnam are likely to establish normal diplomatic relations. After that happens, the subject of Cam Ranh Bay will probably be raised because Vietnam has already publicly offered the U. S. a chance to use it, at least on some basis.

Why should U. S. strategists consider Vietnam? What aspects in our new national military strategy would lead us to consider Vietnam to have an important role when the U. S. has virtually ignored its existence for 17 years? As one of the few communist regimes left in the world, what makes it different?

This paper will review the impact of the changes in the world on the region and in the region itself. Then it will look at the major reasons for American interest in the area. Finally, it will consider the negative aspects of the U. S. return to Vietnam and make some recommendations for American strategists.

II. THE CHANGED WORLD

A. The Philippines Among the many changes in the world today is the departure of American forces from the Philippines. After more than 90 years the United States no longer has Clark Air Base and Subic Bay to maintain a presence in the Far East. Clark Air Base had been the Air Force's largest single overseas installation. It was valuable as a logistics hub and played a major role as a refueling stop for aircraft flying from Guam or Japan to Diego Garcia.¹ Subic Bay has had a key repair center

for the U. S. navy for nearly half a century. Notwithstanding the end of the Cold War, these facts alone would prompt a full scale review of America's role and objectives in the Far East, and in particular in Southeast Asia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end to world wide confrontation would seem to make the Philippine bases superfluous. Indeed, the exit of U. S. forces from the Philippines is in line with the draw down in Europe and the closing of American bases in Greece, Spain, and Germany. The U. S. Navy has been noticeably quiet about the affect of the closing of Subic. Former U. S. military activities there have been spread among Guam, Japan, Hawaii, Alaska, and a small repair facility at Singapore just recently arranged with the government there. The U. S. government is talking with the governments of Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia about similar arrangements.

But it was only a few years ago that the bases were considered irreplaceable. 65% of training in the western Pacific was in the Philippines.² Clearly major adjustments are having to be accomplished. What is not clear is the effectiveness of the U. S. adjustments, and the resulting perceptions of these changes by U. S. allies in the area.

B. Vietnam Vietnam is a special case in almost every respect. It has never been a member of ASEAN, and has reeled under a suffocating economic stagnation since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. It is the only communist government in Southeast Asia other than the communist governments installed in the other Indo-

China countries - Laos and Cambodia. It has relied on Soviet aid and advisors for over 15 years and has slipped further behind because of the U. S. led international embargo. Vietnam also has suffered from inept economic policies and corruption.

In recent years it has sought foreign investment and loosened its economy to allow private enterprise in limited areas while maintaining a socialist economy. At the Sixth Party Congress in 1986 Hanoi's leaders decided to begin a process of economic liberalization.³ It has encouraged private initiative in agriculture in order to return to the bountiful harvests that were once routine.

Like all the former satellites of the Soviet Union Vietnam has had to adjust to the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union. This has had two major effects. The communist leadership in Hanoi has tightened political control and rejected a multi party system to avoid a similar "disaster" in Vietnam. Secondly, Vietnam has moved faster to meet the two conditions set by the United States before normal relations can be established. It withdrew its army from Cambodia in 1991 and has worked with China, Thailand, the United States, and the United Nations to resolve the problem of Cambodia's government. Enough progress has been made in Cambodia that for the first time in a generation there is hope of a political settlement and genuine elections.

Vietnam appears also to have worked hard with the United States to determine an accounting of U. S. MIAs from the Vietnam War. In November, 1991, Baker stated that talks had begun with

Vietnam to establish normal relations. Diplomatic recognition has a good chance of being given sometime in 1992.

Soviet forces are virtually gone from Cam Ranh Bay. Vietnam has publicly said that the U. S. could return to Cam Ranh Bay. This reflects Hanoi's desperate search for foreign aid. Alone among the nations of Southeast Asia Vietnam, the archenemy of the United States, has shown at least an initial willingness to support American use of a base. This has to be considered a momentous ramification of the loss of power of the Communist Party in the former Soviet Union.

C. U. S. Military Budget. The reduction of the U. S. military force is of course one of the products of the end of the Cold War. Force levels will drop at least 25% by 1997 and perhaps much further. The declining of the threat, as well as other reasons, is also leading to the closing of bases in a number of countries, notably Germany, Greece, and Spain. The fashion is to bring the forces home to save money as well.

This overall trend seems to argue for the acceptance of the loss of the Philippine bases as part of this drawdown. After all, the U. S. has fewer dollars to spend on overseas bases and forward defense. There simply is no budget for constructing or acquiring new bases. Congress is highly unlikely to allocate the funds in today's environment. Thus, a lower presence appears inevitable.

D. National Strategy America's national objectives, if recently enunciated more clearly, have not changed in generations:

- (1) The survival of the United States as a free and independent nation, with its fundamental values intact and its institutions and people secure.
- (2) A healthy and growing U. S. economy to ensure opportunity for individual prosperity and resources for national endeavors at home and abroad.
- (3) Healthy, cooperative and politically vigorous relations with allies and friendly nations.
- (4) A stable and secure world, where political and economic freedom, human rights and democratic institutions flourish.⁴

The national military strategy has shifted focus in recent years to recognize the changing realities of the world. In addition to deterrence and strategic defense, the national military strategy incorporates forward presence, crisis response, and reconstitution. In particular, the concepts of forward presence and crisis response call for American strategists to consider alternatives to the Philippine bases.

With the closing of many bases overseas, the forward presence concept in the national military strategy is generally interpreted to mean stationing fewer forces overseas and projecting forces from the United States. This is in contrast to the earlier strategy of forward defense which depended on stationing of forces on overseas bases.

But forward presence means fewer bases, not the total lack of overseas bases. In strategically important regions of the world where friendly governments make bases available, bases are still the preferred method of operating when the concept of operations justifies the cost.

The logic of the national military strategy requires at least a consideration of what a base in Vietnam has to offer. The requirements of forward presence and crisis response do not end when the last U. S. forces leave the Philippines in 1992. It is no less valid today than ten years ago (although the threat was different) that the best way to implement the strategy is a visible presence every day. Bases make that presence much easier and more effective.

E. Summary. The defense writer Anthony Cordesman in a recent article in Armed Forces Journal describes eleven major forces of change in the Far East. In addition to those addressed elsewhere in this paper, Cordesman discusses the emergence of the "Little Tigers" - South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia - as contributing to a further shift of the U. S. economic orientation towards Asia; the declining importance of Australia and New Zealand; the continuing potential for another India-Pakistan war; the growing economic tension between Japan and the United States; and the major role that Russia continue to play in the Pacific because of its major forces in the Far East.⁵

The Far East is swirling with change. The international structures which have stabilized Europe, for example, are not present in the Orient. Instead, American military forces have been the agent of stability the last 40 years. Cordesman rightfully claims that "Asia is becoming as important to the U. S. economy as Europe, and may well be far more important in terms of trade by the year 2000."⁶

The pace of economic transformation which is so breath taking in some of the countries is only beginning to appear in other countries such as parts of China and not at all in others. This may be a major force of instability in the next two decades.

III. Reasons for U. S. Interests in the Region

A. Strategic Location Subic and Clark preceded the Cold War and possessed a value in our national military strategy prior to World War II when U. S. defense budgets were far smaller than they are in 1992. America's interest in unrestricted commerce and freedom of the seas has existed since before the turn of the century.

Perhaps more important than the significant economic role of the region is its location. 4000 merchant ships pass through the Straits of Malacca every month.⁷ 70% of Japan's oil supplies come the Middle East and pass through the area. The Straits of Malacca and the Singapore area are one of the key strategic choke points in the world, comparable to the Panama and Suez Canals and the Straits of Gibraltar.

But the most important value of bases in Vietnam would be the same as that provided by Subic Bay. It would give the United States the ability to control and protect the sea lanes in one of the major choke points of the world. The countries of Southeast Asia and Japan are critically dependent upon peaceful use of the Straits of Malacca and the waters of Southeast Asia for the sources of its oil from the Persian Gulf, trade with Europe, and growing investment in the ASEAN countries. The U. S. CINCPAC in 1985 Admiral S. R. Foley, Jr. saw the fundamental reason for the U. S. presence in the Pacific as the security of the Persian/Arabian Gulf.⁸

Just as Subic Bay has done, Vietnam improves America's capability to respond to crises in the Middle East and Northeast Asia by providing a centralized location which cannot be done from Japan or Hawaii. The distance from Cam Ranh Bay to the Straits of Hormuz is about 5700 miles; to South Korea about 2200 miles. By way of contrast, Diego Garcia is about 2600 miles from the Straits of Hormuz and Pearl Harbor is about 3900 miles from South Korea. When Lord Admiral Fisher consolidated the Royal Far Eastern Fleet at Singapore in 1904, he was following the same strategy.

B. Economic Importance The region has become an important trading partner for the United States over the years. The ASEAN countries now rank fifth in a ranking of trading partners for the United States at \$27 billion in 1987, or 11% of overall U. S.

trade.⁹ Its population of 321 million is almost as large as Europe's and is 33% larger than the U. S.¹⁰ Trade across the Pacific is now more than \$300 billion and exceeds Atlantic trade by one third.¹¹ Growth rates exceeding six percent for most of the 1970's and 1980's in most of these countries have made them more independent of the benefit of the military dollars that bases can bring.

The ASEAN nations export 88% of the world's rubber, 57% of the world's tin, 73% of the palm oil, and 70% of the copra. Significant exports of copper, coal, nickel, and tungsten and much of East Asia's oil and natural gas are also part of the ASEAN trade. "The United States is the largest investor in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Singapore and ranks second to Japan in Indonesia and Thailand."¹²

C. Regional Stability and Security Concerns In 1985 U. S. CINCPAC Admiral S. R. Foley, Jr. saw four fundamental roles for the Pacific fleet: provide early response to warnings of war; protect Japan; provide security to the northwestern approaches to the United States; and with the decline of the Soviet threat most importantly to secure the Indian Ocean trade routes, especially the Middle East oil flow to Europe and Japan.¹³ These have not changed. The national military strategy describes regional instability as one of the major threats in the next decade. In contrast to the NATO countries who are reducing military expenditures in the wake of the end of the Cold War, many of the developing nations are arming steadily as their economies permit.

Many see the umbrella of the superpowers folding up and have decided that they must provide their own defense.

1. Alliances and Security As the remaining world super power, the commitment and resolve of the United States is being watched by the nations in the area as never before. With a presence in Southeast Asia for over 90 years, will the United States let a power vacuum develop? Admiral Hardisty testified before Congress in 1990 that "multipolar, regional threats now require an increased emphasis on maintaining regional stability and balance".¹⁴

Multilateral security organizations have not been formed in the past for any of the nations in the region primarily because the United States provided an umbrella of protection against the only common threat - the Soviet Union. Malaysia and Singapore have a defense consulting arrangement with Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand known as the Five Party Defense Arrangement (FPDA). The history of security alliances is on a bilateral and often an ad hoc basis. The United States does have bilateral security arrangements with Thailand and the Philippines. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is an economic alliance only. It consists of Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and recently Brunei.

Nearly all the nations in the area have expressed a desire for the United States to maintain a presence in the region in order to prevent a power vacuum and to ensure regional stability.

There is a general reluctance, however, to open new bases for the United States. Thailand has stated that it does not desire a return of the United States to the bases of 20 years ago. Singapore has agreed to a small repair facility for naval vessels that will require a hundred people or so. Indonesia has offered to make similar arrangements in order to earn foreign exchange, but has expressed concern at arrangements on a scale any more substantial.

2. Japan The nations in the region have an abiding concern over the Japanese military, which now has the third largest budget in the world at \$32.7 billion in 1989.¹⁵ Since the Gulf War, elements in Japan have been stirring to expand the military role to restore its reputation and credibility, believing that "Japan has to play a bigger role, especially in the new world order."¹⁶ The departure of the U. S. from the Pacific or its significant reduction would force Japan to increase its presence to fill the void. Throughout the Far East memories of World War II linger, however. While recognizing the economic power of Japan and benefiting from its continued investment in their economies, the Southeast Asian nations are comfortable with Japanese military efforts only as part of a U. S. military bilateral effort.

3. China and India. Looming over the humming economies of Southeast Asia is the lumbering giant of China. Its military spending has increased 50% since 1989, reaching \$5.8 billion in

1992.¹⁷ Its real spending is actually much higher because this number excludes capital expenditures and income from arms sales and military factories. Its military has three million people.¹⁸ China is working to acquire air refueling capability, to develop a blue water navy, and eventually to build an aircraft carrier.¹⁹ Although not modern by U. S. standards, its submarine forces are the third largest in the world with 113 attack submarines, including one that it has built itself. It has over 50 major combatant ships and 850 patrol and coastal combatants.²⁰

For the countries of Southeast Asia the growing might of India is also a source of increasing interest. India is developing a very capable navy with over 40 major combat ships, including two aircraft carriers.²¹ It is developing into a regional power with sway from the Arabian Sea to the Straits of Malacca.

4. Vietnam An immediate effect would be created among the other nations of Southeast Asia on the commitment of the United States to the region. Particularly by locating in Vietnam the other nations would be reassured on the future stability in the area. Military expenditures by countries such as Thailand could be reduced, thus enhancing peace and reducing tensions.

Also, U. S. use of a base in Vietnam could produce an important leverage effect on China, which has been lost since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It should increase U. S. influence in Vietnam and help moderate tensions between Vietnam and China

which flare up from time to time. The Spratly Islands continue to be a source of dispute and will become contested hotly if significant amounts of oil and gas are discovered.

The U. S. base would provide the U. S. access to the Vietnamese government to possibly influence Vietnamese policy - just as continued dialogue with China is maintained to exert an influence on its policy (though with debatable success). It may also be a boon to economic growth in one of the last countries of economic stagnation in the Far East. In this respect a base or bases could help remove one of the last sources of regional instability and concerns of the other Southeast Asian nations.

5. Thailand. The most important source of instability and concern to all the countries of Southeast Asia for the last ten years has been the unending dilemma of Cambodia. It has created a large refugee problem along the eastern Thai border and made other governments suspicious of Vietnam's motives and goals.

Thailand has considered Vietnam its primary threat since the late 1970's. Since 1988 Thailand's defense spending is up 38% and is expected to reach \$2.8 billion in 1992. Its army is now one million men in 23 divisions counting reserves. It has purchased 18 F-16's and is expanding its airfields in the south.²²

Recently relations between Thailand and Vietnam have improved with Vietnam's withdrawal of its army from Cambodia. Late in 1991 the Thai chief of staff and his deputies visited Vietnam.

Thailand could be an alternative to Vietnam or the Philippines. It offers the same strategic advantages as Vietnam while not quite as close to the sea routes through the South China Seas. The cost would probably be much lower than in Vietnam because Thailand has continued to operate its base at Sattahip.

Here the major obstacle is the strong reluctance of the Thai government to reintroduce Americans back into Thailand. The Thais have a very friendly relationship with the United States as evidenced by the training and advisory program of about 200 people there.

Thailand has had a strong rate of economic growth for over a decade. It is satisfied with the current level of foreign assistance and like many nations is sensitive to sovereignty issues. The abrupt withdrawal of U. S. forces in the 1970's left many Thais determined not to be placed in a position of vulnerability again.

6. Summary. According to Tai Ming Cheung, a defense writer in Hong Kong, "any attempt by potential aspirants to replace the U. S. in its strategic role is likely to be unwelcome. There are still deep suspicions of the Japanese and Chinese, and the Indians are an unknown element in East Asia."²³ Admiral Kelly recently said that the "United States has the only credible military force that all nations in the region believe contributes to regional stability."²⁴ In the same interview with Sea Power Magazine Admiral Kelly stated that the U. S. "fully intends to

continue our forward presence in the Pacific."²⁵ In a visit to Singapore in September, 1991, Admiral Jeremiah stated that the U. S. plans to "continue to keep one carrier battle group permanently stationed in the western Pacific" and that the U. S. will continue a program of frequent exercises, short term force deployments, and visits by units stationed in the United States.²⁶ Occasional cruises through the waters of Southeast Asia will not convey the strong interest of the United States when the regional powers are working so diligently to expand and improve their fleets. Nor will it give the United States the ability to work with and train with the navies and air forces of these countries, which helps immensely in building alliances.

IV. Drawbacks and Disadvantages

Two major obstacles exist to any return of U. S. forces to Vietnam. The first is the continuing anger in the United States over the Vietnam War. Many will never accept a normal relationship with a communist government that inflicted over 50,000 deaths on America. But this anger is receding and a sizable element of the government and the people recognize the time is coming very soon to put the past behind us and to do what is best for the United States now. Just as the United States has in the past and does with other communist governments, the most effective way to achieve U. S. policy objectives is to work with those governments, especially when they appear to be trying to work with the United States. Recognition of the Vietnamese

government is coming very soon any way. It is only a matter of time.

A second obstacle is the significant cost that would be required to renovate Vietnamese facilities. They are now in such a state of disrepair that the cost will be substantial. Neither Vietnam nor the United States can afford the several billion dollars that are likely to be needed.

One possible solution would be a sharing of the cost with one third each paid for by Japan, the United States, and the ASEAN nations. All benefit from American forces' continuing presence. And none of the ASEAN countries have to change their national policies about foreign bases. Spread over three to five years, the cost would be quite manageable. By admitting Vietnam into the ASEAN group, in which it has expressed an interest, this solution is a win/win situation for all the countries in the region. Japan may be willing to agree to such an arrangement in order to accommodate future reductions of U. S. forces in Japan.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Without a doubt Southeast Asia and the waters of the East Indies are one of the strategic choke points of the world. Bases in Southeast Asia provide a centralized staging and logistic point for two of the major areas of instability and turmoil in the world for the United States.

The prerequisites of key components of both the national military strategy in forward presence and crisis response and the

maritime strategy of sea control and power projection call for suitable bases somewhere in the area. This is just as true today as it was during and before the Cold War. U. S. national interests have not wavered in the last 75 years. When English sea power was at its apogee in the nineteenth century, England was not content to cruise the Mediterranean, however frequently. It recognized that bases at the critical choke points of Gibraltar, Malta, and the Suez Canal were vital to its maritime strategy and strength as a nation. The scale and technology have changed, but the logic has not.

Once diplomatic relations have been established the United States should begin port visits to Cam Ranh Bay and soon thereafter initiate visits by Air Force aircraft. Gradually over the course of one to three years logistics capabilities should be developed. The goal should be the home porting of several ships and a major logistics sea and air hub by the end of the 1990's. The years of hostility in the United States toward a foe of twenty years ago must be overcome, however. A satisfactory cost arrangement, such as the one proposed earlier, must be determined.

A second recommendation is for the United States to continue discussions with Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia on creating small logistics support facilities with potential for development. The United States should never again find itself in a position of depending on one country to the extent that hundreds of millions of dollars are demanded for payment in an

almost ransom like manner. Additionally, the multi-nation arrangements could be very useful in developing closer military relationships and stronger bonds of alliance.

Dramatic political opportunities are likely to present military strategists a valuable opportunity that the United States should not hesitate to grasp. Southeast Asia will only grow in importance as its economy expands, and as the Persian Gulf becomes more important and more unstable. The United States should not be withdrawing world wide. It must remain engaged in an area of vital interest, as Southeast Asia certainly is.

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